

Annotations 3--Frequencies: Investigations into Culture, History and Technology Taka Iimura

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IDENTITY IN THE VIDEO OF TAKAHIKO IIMURA

"Takahiko Iimura at the Lux; film, video, cd-rom, installation." [1]

Recently, I made two video works which concentrate on the notion of identity, language and cultural politics. The first one was made in 1994 and the second in 1996, and they are related to each other in form and content. The first work is entitled AIUEONN Six Features. 'A', 'I', 'U', 'E', and 'O' are Japanese vowels; although the final 'NN' is not a vowel, it sounds like one and comes at the end of the phonetic Japanese alphabet. There are three different types of character systems in Japanese: one, called kanji in Japanese, originated in China and the other two, called hiragana and katakana, are both phonetic alphabets which were developed in Japan. Katakana is used primarily for foreign words, but hiragana, which originated in the tenth century, is an important component of Japanese along with kanji. I use hiragana simultaneously with the Roman alphabet in this video. The five vowels are quite basic in both Japanese and Indo-European languages, but their order is different: we say "A-I-U-E-O", and you say "A-E-I-O-U". The Japanese phonetic alphabet is based upon these vowels. Vowels play a much bigger role in Japanese than in Indo-European languages. My name Iimura consists of two words: 'II', the first, contains two vowels, and 'MURA', the second, contains both vowels and consonants. The Chinese characters in my name translate as 'Rice Village'.

I have worked in various media including experimental cinema since 1960 and video art since 1970. Now in the 1990s, I have started to work with computers. My work typically involves computer manipulation used to distort images of my face which are first recorded on video, then recreated by computer. Concerning content, I have frequently had a problem dealing with issues of identity in my work, particularly in a Western context. I have less of a problem in Japan where one's identity is given naturally and it is not questioned. I first went to the United States in the mid-1960s and have worked in and out of that country ever since. In the US identity is not given, but something that one must personally create. Such identity comes about not only through one's actions, but also via the language one speaks which attracts special attention because one presents oneself through it.

In my work I have examined both language and media simultaneously. I produced a series of short video pieces concerning my identity, Self Identity (1972-74) and Double Identities (1979). Each are one to several minutes in length. In Self Identity I appear in the monitor and in Double Identities in the monitor within another monitor verbally questioning my own identity. For instance, in the first piece of Self Identity, I alternately say: "I am Takahiko Iimura" and "I am not Takahiko Iimura." In the former statement, my voice is synchronised with the image and therefore identified. The latter is done with an off-screen voice and therefore is not identified with the image. At the end, I use both synchronised and off-screen voices to say: "I am not Takahiko Iimura", which sounds like "I am not not Takahiko Iimura." (It is actually "I I am am not not Takahiko Takahiko Iimura Iimura.") This is equivalent to a

positive: "I am Takahiko Iimura." Thus, the double negative becomes a positive. The same logic applies in the first section of Double Identities, but the picture is different because there are two representations of the same face, one in the monitor within the monitor, the other is outside the monitor within. Thus, it is a conversational piece between two images of same person. I am not only questioning the identity of who says 'I' in relation to the picture, but also the 'I' which is heard by others. Roland Barthes once wrote, "The 'I' of the one who writes is not the same as the 'I' which is read by 'thou.'"[2] I could have said this in a similar manner: "The 'I' of the one who says 'I' is not same as the 'I' which is heard by 'thou.'"

A I U E O N N Six Features is a video piece in which I have simultaneously examined the relationship of words in the Japanese and Roman alphabets with the sound and the image. The words are the basic letters of vowels which, as I said before, do not have any particular meaning. They are visual representations, yet the form of Japanese hiragana and the Roman alphabet is quite different. The sound on the video comes from an undistorted voice which is initially synchronised with the image, but is later desynchronised. Of the three elements - letters, sound and image, which are distortions of the 'real' image made by a computer (a System G developed by Sony) - the image is the most appealing. I produced the first version of A I U E O N N in 1982 using exactly the same structure but without a computer or picture distortion. The computerised version is much more playful and entertaining. Though the images appear to dominate the piece, the sound works differently. The de-synchronised voices may initially puzzle the audience, but the repetition shows that de-synchronisation was done intentionally.

We, as viewers, are conditioned to experience a voice synchronised with an image, but when a film is dubbed into a foreign language, unsynchronised voices commonly exist. For example, when an American western is shown on Japanese television, John Wayne 'speaks' Japanese, and likewise Toshiro Mifune 'speaks' English on American television. Such manipulation is not just technical as cultural politics is also at work, since I see Wayne more often on Japanese television than Mifune on American television.

A I U E O N N Six Features, has been exhibited in several different formats: as an installation, a performance piece and a single tape. When it has been used as an installation, different shapes could be created depending upon the arrangement of the video monitors: several monitors could be placed in a horizontal line, or along three walls in a room, or in a vertical circle on a wall with a rectangular projection screen at the center. Finally, an interactive version can be assembled in which a viewer can select, via computer, an image which is then projected onto the center of a screen. In a performance context, I would stand next to the screen where the image is projected, and utter the voice which corrects the 'wrong' pronunciation; the real and the projected images, side by side, are contrasted and a 'correct' and a 'wrong' pronunciation occur simultaneously. One may wonder what is 'real' or 'correct'. Performance allows me to move between live and recorded versions, and gives me a chance to return to the place where the image originates.

I have two versions on single tape; one two and a half minutes long and the other is seven minutes long. The shorter version consists of only the voice synchronised with two sets of

images; the first set using Japanese hiragana, the second the Roman alphabet. There is no de-synchronisation of image and sound as the intention is only to show the difference between languages in the Japanese and Roman alphabets, in relation to the image and voice. This version is, in fact, quite straight forward and effective. However, many people who do not know Japanese initially have trouble understanding the structure of the de-synchronised version. Its structure is based on the permutation of the six vowels alternating between Japanese hiragana and the Roman alphabet, providing a gap between image and voice. This may create confusion, albeit an organized confusion. This concept of a gap between image and sound is related to Jacques Derrida's seminal work *Differance* (with 'a'), in which the difference between 'Image', 'Letter' and 'Voice' works in space and movement.[3] The differences between the images and sounds become apparent with the delays between the letters and the voices in the installation. Although this video was made before I learned about Derrida's *Differance*, I find his thinking to be quite close to my work, so I feel it could be considered as a realisation of the concepts he discusses in *Differance*.

My second video is called *Performance: A I U E O NN Six Features*. It is not a document of a performance, but a recreated version of the performance of *A I U E O NN Six Features*. I would not call it a performance video but rather a video performance in which the idea of the performance is realised in electronic terms. In the performance of *A I U E O NN Six Features*, there is a gap or 'differance' in the image and sound, which I have tried to 'correct' in the performance through image and sound. I used my 'live' voice simultaneously with a pre-recorded voice, so one hears two voices at once. On my real face - the image - I wear yellow make-up (as obvious reason as Japanese) but it is undistorted even though it intermingles with the computerised one. In one section, both images flicker aggressively and an electronic chemistry, which ends with an all-yellow real face, occurs. I use the word 'real' to describe my face, but this is questionable as it is painted yellow. My concern here is the problem of multi-culturalism in video. I made the piece bilingually using both the Japanese and Roman alphabets, but it is not a translation of Japanese into the Roman alphabet in any ordinary sense. I consider both languages to be original and visually unique-concepts which do not translate.

Multi-culturalism is based on the multiplicity of culture; it regards each culture as a unique entity which may not be replaced with another culture. This applies to language as well, although it does not mean to deny the necessity of translation. Just as a vowel has no meaning by itself, so there is no need to translate it and I try to let a vowel speak a universal significance by itself. A letter or a character may be national or regional, but a sound is more universal. So even if one does not understand Japanese, one can immediately recognise the voice and relate it to an image. Image is crucial in these videos as one sees an Asian face and features. The intention of the distorted image is not only to create a visual shock, but to emphasise the cultural specificity of the face; one reviewer compared the face with 'classical images from Japanese woodcuts.'[4] I was not particularly conscious of any cultural background at the time of making this video, but the result might imply that I had unconsciously, yet willingly revealed it working with the computer.

(The following is an edited transcript of the question and answer session which followed the above presentation at the Frequencies' seminar series which took place at SOAS, University of London in November 1996.)

Moderator: Thank you very much. I think there are some very important points about language and cultural politics to which you pointed, so people would like to ask some questions and comment about the materials.

Q: You mentioned earlier, before the presentation of the video, that you would like to link it with identity. I was just interested in where identity came in with the visual presentation.

Takahiko: Before this piece I made videos, one called Self Identity, another called Double Identities. As I said earlier, these are pieces I made in the United States. In both pieces I say, facing the camera, "I am Takahiko Imura" and "I am not Takahiko Imura", contradictory statements like Zen Koans. In other pieces from the same work I also say "You are Takahiko Imura" and "You are not Takahiko Imura". Someone once called this similar to when Rene Magritte said, "This is not a pipe" in one of his paintings. That is, my image is not my real self, but also my point is that by rotating the pronouns from "I" to "You" to "He / She" and combining them

with affirmatives and negatives, I can relate them to the camera's point of view. In fact I made an installation called I=YOU=HE / SHE by equating all the pronouns. In this piece three cameras are set up from three different points of view: front, profile, and rear view of the person who sits in the center. The audience member, who sits in the center, will pick up the headphone and hear voices saying "I am...", "You are...", and "He / She is...", then try to identify them while looking them from those three points of view, one after the other. The same person can be identified as "I", "You", or "He / She", according to the viewpoint. This idea came from

traditional Japanese, which has no distinction between "I" and "you". The word depends upon who is talking to whom, and, according to that context, the identification can be determined. Initially in the video I set up "I-Front", "You-Profile", and "He / She-Back", but once the views were rotated, those set-ups become mixed and equated. Through these experiments I have tried to depict identity through video, but the first piece you saw here does not directly question the concept of identity except that all the images are taken from my face. As you see, the computer drastically distorts the face to the extent that it is almost not identifiable, like in a farce. Yet I return to the so-called real one though yellowish during the next performance video. One might say this is an identity crisis concerning myself.

Q: One thing I would like to ask is why do you use yourself in those images? I guess you partially addressed that by what you said about the identity of yourself, but what kinds of statements are you trying to make or questions are you trying to ask about the nature of identity and language?

Takahiko: Well, the identity is like the person who talked this morning. How you identify yourself as well as the other whom you know, yourself as a subject, yet you are the other person at the same time. So it is like a kind of questioning of positives and negatives at the same time. Logically speaking, you cannot have both the positive and the negative at the same time, yet

you can have both in the ideology of Zen. In a Western way of thinking it is illogical, but it is a valid statement in Zen. One can have both a positive and a negative at the same time; it is a contradiction, yet it is real. Like the ancient Chinese symbols of Yin and Yang in a circle, you have Yin, the dark part, negative, and Yang, the light part, positive, in the same circle, which represents the universe as a whole. Also within this black part there is a white dot, and within the white part, a black dot is contained. This means that it has a double structure, that is, within the positive is contained a negative, and vice versa: Negative within positive and positive within negative. Though Yin and Yang is a graphic symbol, I have transferred this double structure into media: film and video. I did this graphically with film (24 Frames Per Second, 1975-78) using only black and white spacings (film leaders), and linguistically with video (Self Identity, 1972-74, and Double Identities, 1979), in which, as I mentioned earlier, I speak my name along with positive and negative qualifiers in front of a camera.

Q: Some of the expressions went into a very sort of stylized, what appeared to us as a Western sort of Japanese expression, and then you were completely natural. Concerning the stylized expressions, do they have a deeper meaning, is there a meaning that we might not understand, does the expression mean more than just the sound, like a mask or a characteristic, something which goes deeper?

Takahiko: Well, when I show the video to Western audiences, saying "This is my face", I have received the response that the face looks like that of a Kabuki actor. But when I made these pictures, I never thought about Kabuki. It might just be a coincidence, or it might reflect a cultural background. What you call "the deeper meaning" depends on how you read the text, or rather the gap, between the texts of letter, image, and sound. Even in this simple text of vowels, there is a lot to say.

Q: In trying to probe further into the meaning of all this, is your work on the level of a game or is it an extension of Zen, what are the boundaries between the influences which are behind it, and where you are taking off as an independent thinker or commentator or artist?

Takahiko: Well, it's hard to distinguish whether it's a philosophy or a game; you can see it as a game, but it could be both. The game can be seen as a philosophy, and philosophy can be seen as a game, too. If it works both ways, how do you see it?

Q: You mentioned a connection with Kabuki. Well, grimace is the deliberate misrepresentation of normal features, the exaggeration. So in that sense, as you have already indicated, you are in a tradition, in the tradition of an art form. I'd just like to ask whether you're aware of grimace in the work of Arnulf Rainer, the Austrian artist, who has himself acknowledged the very important debt to Xavier Messerschmitt, the 18th century sculptor who specialised in grimaces? There's also a series of Rainer making grimaces on the grimaces of Messerschmitt. So are you aware of that work?

Takahiko: I know the artist and his work, but I didn't think about it when I was making this piece. However, maybe you've found a relationship.

Q: What I'd like to ask concerns the technical, the technological aspect of this particular work. Here the technique allows you to go to the extremes, beyond drawing in a sense. It's more lifelike, it verges on so many extreme emotional states. Could you perhaps say something about that, your attitude to the technology you're using, and to the potential of it in staging extreme states of being?

Takahiko: Well, the emotional aspect of the piece is a kind of manipulation through the feature of my own facial expression. I experimented using many different ways, then I more or less arrived at this facial expression. While I was working with the computer, I learned that the technician had many different ways of modifying images, so I had to discover which one best fit the sound of, say, the letter "A". There is no real reason behind this, somehow my instinct picked up on the image I finally chose. The sound of "E" possesses a square feature, which I like the most among the forms. It contains an expression of fear and hatred as well, so it could be

interpreted that way. Yet the sound of "E" itself doesn't mean fear or hatred in any way. So it is very arbitrary and coincidental. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, has said that the signifier, for instance, "A" or "E", is arbitrarily constituted. Then I made the signified, the image. This image is also arbitrarily created, yet it shows a certain emotion and reflects the cultural background.

Q: Might be the cultural background, but you're using a technique not available to someone working in the 18th or 19th. This is really the thing I'm particularly interested in. What is your attitude to manipulating the Japanese traditions with a particular technique available only to you and your generation in this period of time? What is your attitude, are you happy with it, are you comfortable with it, are you critical towards it?

Takahiko: Well, I feel a kind of ambiguity. I feel both aspects. In a way I like it, yet at the same time I don't like it. That's why I made the second version, which is a sort of decomputerisation. As I said, all the manipulation is moving toward, or supposed to return to, the real. Yet the question arises, what does "real" really mean within the context of these features? I have these love and hate feelings towards using such technology.

Q: My question is in some sense answered by last question, because I was going to say that your last piece, your philosophical game, if you like, seemed to reveal this structure in which the computerised image provided the ability for you to order, to pervert, and, in some sense, your response suggests a reference to grimace and the extremities of emotion. Then you talked about the decomputerised image, which then led to a discussion about the real. So in some sense are you trying to say that the computer leads to perversion and manipulation, and only through decomputerisation can we return to the real?

Takahiko: Not necessarily. Even though what I am supposed to present is real, it is the technology which is doing the presenting. So one could not escape from technology even if one wanted to do so. It's the way that it is used, and how it is used in the manipulation. The computer I used is a different aspect of the technology. I made a farce by computer, and it may as real as I am in straight video.

Q: Your face up there is no more real than the computerised image; it is made up of dots, dots, dots, and bits of color.

Takahiko: It's just the difference, a different aspect, a different way of using it. How you present it is more important than the technology you actually used.

Q: One of the things that I noticed when I first watched the piece on video was this kind of clear idea or kind of wanting to ask you whether you had a clear idea of who that audience would be, quite specifically and quite culturally, whether it was made for a western audience or a kind of English speaking audience through the way that it utilized not only the technology, but also in terms of the kind of the characteristics of this kind of grimace, to its almost kind of, to me, accentuated sense of wanting to convey something that was actually quite difficult at the same time, so incorporated those kinds of facial exchange but also at the same time because would it have had same currency if it were speaking to another Japanese speaking audience, except through, I suppose, the kind of shared idea that would also have the same sense of aspiration or communication.

Takahiko: If you know Japanese, you perceive the video differently from someone who doesn't know Japanese. Yet those who know Japanese also become confused initially, as the voice doesn't synchronise with the image. I tried to separate the sound from the image and treat them individually. As for audience, I don't necessarily differentiate between Japanese and non-Japanese; the video can be seen by both regardless of their knowledge of Japanese. In fact, it has been enjoyed by children in Europe as well as in Japan.

Q: You just talked about confusion and producing confusion in the audience. Is that the end in itself, is that what you want to produce, and that's kind of where it ends, or is that confusion meant to lead the audience somewhere else?

Takahiko: Since we are so much accustomed to seeing synchronised voices within a "talking picture", most people become confused when they see something else, even though this is not my aim. I said the confusion occurs as a first step, not as the final one. When the gap between the image and the sound is repeated, you realize something else is happening, and when you perceive the distinctions between the image and the sound, you even enjoy it.

Q: So it's kind of like defamiliarising.

Takahiko: Yes.

Q: Are you going to continue to use technology in that manner for a while, or are you just going to sort of decomputerise your work?

Takahiko: I won't use exactly the same technique in another piece, but I won't give up working with computers. I'll continue using them, but in a different way. In fact, that special machine is terribly expensive. I can not afford one myself, but I had a chance to use one at a Sony showroom after business hours.[5] I have also made other works without using a computer at

all. I am not obsessed with computers or technology, and want to be free from any particular technology or the software of technology.

NOTES:

[1] This article was published entirely in the catalog of "takahiko iimura at the Lux - film, video, cd-rom, installation," London Filmmakers' Co-op, London, 1998, pp. 12-23. The transcript of the speech was modified by the author with the assistance of William Thompson, New York.

[2] Roland Barthes, 'To Writes: An Intransitive Verb?', *The Structuralist Controversy*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1972, p.141.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 1973, pp.129-160.

[4] A program note for the exhibition of Takahiko Iimura by Robert West, Curator of Film and Video, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, 1994.

[5] Assisted by Sony Corporation and Sony PCL Inc., both in Tokyo.